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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 001908

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: CHAVEZ AGREES TO RECALL REFERENDUM

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor, for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

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Summary  
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[11.](#) (C) The National Electoral Council (CNE) announced June 3 that its preliminary calculations indicated that the opposition had collected enough signatures to activate the recall referendum against President Hugo Chavez. In a national radio and television broadcast (cadena) from Miraflores Palace a few hours later, Chavez conceded the "clear tendencies" of the CNE's projections, claimed that this really was a GOV moral victory, and challenged the opposition to do "political battle." Some Chavez supporters reacted violently while others reluctantly accepted the results, reiterating charges of opposition fraud. The Coordinadora Democratica (CD) released its numbers -- with a greater margin of victory -- and called on the CNE to set the referendum for August 8, a date agreed to verbally during the signature appeals negotiations. Delivering the preliminary results, CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez did not set a date for the recall vote. Both sides called their followers to mass marches in Caracas, the opposition on June 5 and GOV on June [16.](#) Chavez has taken the high road, admittedly his version of it, and now seems ready to take on the opposition personally in the referendum campaign. End summary.

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CNE Announces Probable Presidential Recall  
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[12.](#) (U) National Electoral Council (CNE) Director Jorge Rodriguez announced June 3 that the CNE's preliminary calculations indicated that the opposition had collected 2,451,821 signatures, just 15,738 over the 2,436,083 needed to activate the recall referendum against President Hugo Chavez. Rodriguez did not set a date for the referendum, which the rules say must be done when final results are announced. CNE President Francisco Carrasquero said on May 2 that if the opposition collected enough signatures via the appeals process, the referendum could take place on August 8. Press reports say CNE technicians have proposed moving the date to August 15, four days before the date when the possibility of replacing a recalled Chavez via elections expires. Rodriguez also announced that nine opposition deputies will definitely face a recall vote.

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Opposition Claims Wider Margin  
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[13.](#) (U) With the go-ahead from Rodriguez, the Coordinadora Democractica (CD) released its results that showed the opposition had collected 2,569,584 signatures, 133,501 over the threshold. CD Coordinator and Miranda State Governor Enrique Mendoza declared a "moral victory" and thanked opposition parties, civil society, and the international community, including OAS SYG Cesar Gaviria and former President Jimmy Carter, for their support. Mendoza called on the CNE to respect the August 8 date for the referendum, saying the opposition would reject any attempt by the GOV to delay the referendum past August 19.

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Chavez Accepts the Challenge  
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[14.](#) (U) A few hours after the CNE announcement, President Chavez addressed the nation (cadena) June 3 from Miraflores Palace. He rejected he had been defeated and accepted the referendum, conceding the "clear tendencies" of the CNE's projections. Calling the CNE's announcement a victory for "participatory democracy," he recalled that it was he who first proposed the recall referendum be included in the 1999 Constitution. Surrounded by portraits and statues of Simon Bolivar, Christ, and Venezuelan military figures, Chavez made historical analogies to his struggle against the opposition.

Chavez recounted the challenges faced by his administration, accusing the USG of conspiring to overthrow him, and challenged the opposition to prepare for a new Battle of Santa Ines. (During Venezuela's Federal Wars, Gen. Ezequiel Zamora defeated the opposition's army through a series of strategic retreats.) Addressing a widescreen television with images of thousands of supporters, Chavez told his people (the screen) that "this is just a new battle, and what awaits us is a new victory." After the broadcast, Chavez circulated briefly among the crowd outside.

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Chavista Reaction Mixed  
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15. (U) Prior to the President's acceptance of the referendum, Chavez supporters railed against the CNE's decision. Armed groups allegedly linked to the GOV (the pro-Chavez website aporrea said the Tupamaros had taken credit) reacted violently in downtown Caracas on June 2, leaving one person dead and several injured, including opposition Deputy Rafael Marin (septel). (After his speech, Chavez denounced violence "wherever it comes from" and called on all parties to maintain peace.) CNE directors Jorge Rodriguez (pro-Chavez) and Sobella Mejias (pro-opposition) traded allegations June 2-3 about some 15,800 deceased persons that had not been removed from the electoral registry prior to the appeals process. Chavez supporters allege the opposition falsified identity cards in the names of the dead people and sent impostors to make the appeals. Chavez supporters asserted it was an injustice that the margin of victory announced by the CNE was just under the number of supposed deceased persons.

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Both Sides Plan Mass Marches, June 5-6  
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16. (C) The GOV and opposition called for marches in Caracas to support their respective "victories." The opposition plans to march on June 5, the GOV on June 6. The opposition also plans to hold marches in other cities June 6, according to Solidaridad Deputy Alejandro Armas. Armas predicted to poloff June 4 the opposition marches would have large turnouts. He said that turnouts of the opposition and Chavista marches would be good indicators of the popular support each side has for the referendum.

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Comment  
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17. (C) Chavez's acceptance of the referendum is a clear victory for the referendum and a wise political move, especially with the OAS General Assembly just three days away. Chavez believes his embrace of the referendum will save his image as a constitutional democrat, and exonerate the beleaguered CNE as a trustworthy institution. His speech was pure hypocrisy, given the six months of delay he forced on the process. He sought to stain the opposition's victory with fraud allegations not only to steal the momentum from the CD, but also to mollify radical elements within his own movement. He made clear there will be no more middle men, that he personally would defeat the opposition at the ballot box. This was his winning formula for reaching office, and may be his best bet now given the apparent failing of his political machinery -- the Comando Ayacucho -- to save him from the referendum. Up to now, the GOV probably has not utilized its full capacity to boost Chavez's political popularity (and deflate that of the opposition). Chavez now appears ready to try.

18. (C) Why did Chavez give in? We believe it was the OAS/Carter Center observation efforts, in large part, boosted by the Group of Friends and other countries; the perception that the truth would come out, and that opposition elements would use the lack of democratic options to justify violence; and Chavez's belief -- call it vanity -- that once again he can win big at the polls.

SHAPIRO

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